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THE GREAT BATTLE ON THE VISTULA

BY

JULIUS BANDROWSKI

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The Great Battle on the Vistula

by

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translated from Polish

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Motto: „I shall stand at the crossing of the ways“.

First words of military order No. 2, issued to the Army by the first Marshal of Poland, J. Piłsudski on August 19-th, 1920.

After the great victories of the Polish army at Kieff and along the whole immense front from Rzeczyca up to beyond the Roumanian frontier, won in the Spring of 1920, the military glory of the young Polish army seemed to stand at its highest zenith.

But the Headquarter's Staff of the Polish army was quite well aware of the difficulties which existed on the Polish front... The march into the Ukraine and on Kieff was a military necessity on account of the mighty preparations which the Bolsheviks had made all along their western front, even before the pretended commencement of peace negotiations at Barysow. The Polish General Staff, which was then working loyally at the preparations for the armistice, knew quite well that the enemy was bringing up reserves from the interior of Russia and was forming great masses of cavalry and that, with all their energy, the Bolsheviks were preparing for a decisive fight. The

March battles, provoked by the Bolsheviks, completely justified the Polish presumptions.

Hence the Poles, after the great attack on Volhynia and Podolia, commenced a counter-offensive in the Spring, wishing on the one hand to strike at the base of the enemy who continued to concentrate his forces, and on the other to put a final stop to the two chief enterprises which the Bolsheviks were always on the point of commencing namely, the advance from near Kieff and the advance from near Krzemienczug.

The aim of the Polish counter-offensive was only in part attained in spite of the tremendous speed with which the struggle was carried on.

In spite of the fact that the Poles destroyed one whole Bolshevik army, they could not come up with the chief masses of the enemy's troops, which, leaving behind them on their way their food supplies, arms, ammunition, immense amounts of rolling stock, armoured trains, artillery etc., by means of a skilful manoeuvre crossed the Dnieper.

Thus the enemy was not thoroughly broken. It was not possible, either, to get a grasp on the two Bolshevik ways of advance. One of the best parts of the Polish army under the valiant General Rydz-Smigly, took possession of Kieff, building out far to the east a powerful bridge-head on the left side of the Dnieper. But the southern wing of the immense front could not reach Krzemienczug, hence the question of the Bolshevik ways of advance was only half solved.

Thus while the whole of Poland gave way to unrestrained joy at the great glory of the victory, those at the head of the army were working in haste at the

grouping of the best reserves, at the getting into their control as energetically as possible of new thousands of kilometres of railway so as, in any event, to be able to resist the expected onset of the enemy.

Here, though in passing, we must mention that in this work the Polish authorities were helped by the whole local population, the local officials, the local Ukrainian social and national organizations, who in this way testified to their desire that the Ukrainian question should be settled in union with the Poles and against the Bolsheviks.

The foreseen Bolshevik onset had not to be waited for long.

The first blow, after an unsuccessful frontal attack on the Kieff bridge - head, was made by the Bolsheviks in the north, where they tried at one blow to get control of the railway centre at Molodeczno and to fall from the north upon Vilno.

Hence in the first few days of June 1920 a hard battle began, which lasted for some weeks. In this battle the powerful Polish reserves, conducted by the strong hand of General Sosnkowski, kept the enemy back, repulsing him to beyond Dokszycze.

The left wing of the then Polish front, although it did not return to its former position in the region of Polock, was yet able to reach to beyond Dokszycze and to inflict a severe defeat upon the enemy, who was organized here purposely by a considerable number of German officers and non-commissioned officers belonging to the imperial German army, who took a direct part in the fighting.

The fighting had not died down in the north, the frontal attacks on the Kieff bridge-head had not ceased, when the enemy, already in the middle of June, made a new and powerful onset from the south, that is in the district where lay the way of advance through Krzemieneczug. From these three attacks, on Kieff, on Vilno and in the south, it was now clear that the Polish front had to deal with a consistent course of military action, thought out on a large scale and conducted by a very skilful hand... It was now evident that this was no purposeless attacking of sectors, but a work on a large scale, a definite onset upon the Polish front.

Here we should remark that the circumstances of fighting on the east and the conception of that eastern front as a front is and must be something quite different than the idea of a front obtained from fighting in the west of Europe. War on the east, in consequence of the immense distances in question, is conducted almost without lines of trenches, by a thin line of troops, with here and there fortified redoubts. On account of the continual changeability of a territory composed of immense plains, or at times of tremendous woods and wildernesses, of the lack of roads and of the exceptional circumstances in which communication has to be maintained—everything here depends upon the manoeuvres.

It was just this factor together with their excellent acquaintance with the climatic conditions that the Bolsheviks very skilfully took advantage of, leading their attack from an onset on Krzemieneczug.

From this point they sent out a great army of

cavalry which moved westwards by forced marches up to the district of Krym. This army, which was under the orders of the former cavalry sergeant, Budienny, began to use hitherto unknown methods of fighting. It moved forwards absolutely without baggage trains, feeding itself by plundering the population along its way. Forage for the horses was found on the immense expanse of oat-fields in which the oats were just ripening. All tired or used-up horses were replaced from the stables of the peasants. This army was not uniformed, and for this reason could the better hide itself, scattering over the steppes and again showing itself in great masses on the roads.

Budienny at the head of twenty or thirty thousand cavalry finally, after heavy fighting, broke the Polish front in the neighbourhood of Zytomierz.

Then began one violent race, full of savage initiative on Budienny's side, full of heroism and devotion on the side of the Polish infantry, which day and night for whole weeks was obliged to retreat, from an enemy who poured in on every side.

The immense distance between the Polish northern and southern wings brought it about that the Polish reserves, which had been set at liberty now by their victory at Dokszycy, could not get down south in time. The quick movements of the enemy cavalry interrupted at every step the connection between the larger tactical units, cut off the transports and took ammunition and forage from the retreating troops.

The race between the Polish retreating right wing and the cloud of Budienny's cavalry became every day more and more dangerous... Anyone who has every

taken part in a longdrawn out fight knows how much time means in such a fight and what a terrible thing it is when a given body of troops, division or corps *cannot overtake time*.

It was just in this position that the Polish divisions which were chased by Budenny found themselves. They had neither time to sleep nor to eat nor to rest.....

As the result of the position on the south the retreat of General Rydz-Smigly's army, which was defending the Kieff bridge-head, began. This retreat, in which the army forced its way through at the point of the bayonet, took place under very difficult conditions, the more so that at the beginning of July the Bolshevik leaders renewed once again their attack on the north, supporting it, too, with great flanking movements of cavalry, led by the well-known leader Gaja Khan.

News from the front coming into the country began to spread an ever greater panic.

At first the contents of the „communiqués“ made by the Polish Staff were explained and represented by people to themselves as „a skilful manoeuvre“ or as a „trick“, of the Poles. Then the criticism got sharper and sharper. Very soon, however, the development of events, with its ruthless horror and power, stood face to face with the conscience of the nation. A firm decision had to be come to... It had now to be settled whether Poland, a country which, so short a time ago, had been called into life by the arms of the West and by the heart of its own best tradition, was now, after less than two years full of work and success and glory, to renounce its own soldiers, to renounce its own part in the world, to renounce its unity which had been

won with such an effort... Or whether, on the contrary, just in the face of that horror, under the blows falling upon it from the hand of a savage barbarian—it would gather together its strength, it would grow in power and would cast into the balance all its best, would devote its young men, would devote its property, its party spirit, everything, throwing all these things into the scales of fate...

Then there began for the Polish public a great and difficult work... Efforts began to be made to form a Government of National Defence, a government which was to have at its head the representatives of the most numerous classes of the nation, and which was to represent all classes of the community. Work was begun with the aim of reconciling the parties, of making all quarrels cease, of drawing all into the struggle—since all was in danger of perishing...

This work was the more difficult that the position on the front became more and more dangerous.

"Where are our troops, where is our brave army?" cried one man and another, seeing that that army kept on retreating day after day... Seeing that that army was giving up by degrees villages, railway junctions, little towns, big towns, very often places dear to the Polish heart, very often places consecrated by the blood of past sacrifices, by the glory of a great tradition...

And the soldier, retreating amid continual fighting, uncertain of his life for a day or for an hour, uncertain of his sleep, uncertain of his food, deprived of all contact with his country, this soldier who had been marching for weeks together that difficult march of retreat, that infantry man, with his eyes white from the

sun and his lips black with thirst, asked, again, from the depth of a too bitter experience, „Where is my country? What is it doing? What does it think of me? Why doesn't it care for me? Why does it quarrel and debate and forget that I here am leaving my bones on the open threshold of my country, that I am barring the way across that threshold with my bones?..."

And then, as already many times in the course of Poland's two years of existence, as in the first moments of liberty, when the nation cast off the German chains, the eyes of all men began to look at Pilsudski...

Why had he brought things to this pass? — cried some... The Polish State could have come to an agreement with the enemy at Borysów.

Why doesn't he make himself Dictator, — cried others... Why doesn't he go to the front, why doesn't he proclaim to the troops that he himself, personally, is in the fighting line?...

And finally: — „Why doesn't he say what he intends to do? Why does he keep silence? Why doesn't he give some great command to the troops? Why doesn't he order the deserters to be shot? Why doesn't he proclaim a general mobilization?..."

But he, the Commander-in-Chief, slipping off time and again to the front from amid the Councils and great sessions of the parties, appearing in different sectors and listening to the spirit of the soldier as watchfully and carefully as the physician listens to the heart-beats of his patient, he, working whole nights amid the General Staff, moving all day and all night amid the big maps, with his unwearied soldier's tread, continued to consider that the Nation itself must offer

its property, its soul, and that his business, as a leader was to make such a use of all that belonged to the nation that it should become the cause of a disaster for the enemy...

When, in the middle of July, the Polish troops lost, after severe fighting, the former German line of trenches along the river Niemen, when, almost out of breath, they attained, amid continual battles the line Bug, the military position, looked at from the outside, was almost hopeless...

But Pilsudski, having an excellent knowledge of the spirit of his Nation, considered that just then a turn for the better had taken place... Just then everything was cleared up at home, general agreement was arrived at and there was faith in the Government of National Defence, with a representative of the workmen, Daszyński, at its head.

A voice from out the depths of the whole nation now gave summons to the front, to arms... The volunteer army had been formed, the absolute necessity of fighting had been and all classes were entering....

The universities emptied, the schools emptied, institutions emptied, the officials in their places became fewer and fewer. From the workshops came to the army the men who had just returned to work after the destruction caused by the Germans, the people flowed in a mass to the army... The manors and villages began to empty themselves, for every good man had enlisted in the army.

It was impossible to say otherwise than the whole nation was shaken by a quiver of immense enthusiasm. This zeal, this enthusiasm, went to prove that Poland,

having received her freedom from the hands of the cultured victors of the west, knew how to respect it, knew how to defend it to her last breath.

But how to defend it and where?...

Two plans of action were sketched out.

The first one hinged on the retreating of the worn out Polish troops upon the rivers Vistula and San. There the Polish divisions were to be got into order, there they were to be reinforced, there they were to undergo a little training. From that line the Polish troops, encouraged by the enthusiasm of the population, as it were from the last jumping off ground, were to rush upon the enemy in a great counter-offensive, starting from the Warsaw bridge-head, in a north-easterly direction.

This plan, it was true, gave great guarantees of success... The sad side for the Poles of this plan was that in following it, it would be necessary to give up Lwów (Lemberg), it would most probably be necessary to surrender the priceless petroleum wells at Boryslaw. Finally, it did not map out the final crushing and destruction of the adversary's army.

Pilsudski, however, started from the principle that the Polish army could equally successfully lean on the line of the Bug. The Commander-in-Chief considered that resistance there would be possible, the more so that the reserves formed in the country made such a defence possible... But Poland's first Field-Marshal was principally concerned to destroy the enemy's army on Polish territory. He argued that otherwise Poland would soon have to meet a second enemy wave, a wave which, in the form of great reserves, encoura-

ged by the success of the regular Bolshevik army, would be drawn even from the very depths of Russia.

Valued councillors, too, praised this plan, the French officers who in that great struggle showed themselves to be such glorious comrades in arms, above whose officers caps the fire of exploding grenades and shrapnel shone on every battle field from the Vistula to beyond the Niemen.

Hence the Commander-in-Chief decided to follow his own plan, which depended upon the hinging of the whole struggle upon a manoeuvre which was extremely dangerous, but the success of which might completely decide the whole Polish Bolshevik war. In accordance with this plan the Polish troops on the south were to hold the line of the river Zbrucz as their last line of defence, higher up the troops were to retreat further to the west, up to the Vistula. The capital of Poland, Warsaw, was to serve as the bait for the attaining of which the enemy would concentrate the mass of his forces. The triangle of fortresses, Warsaw, Modlin and Demblin, was to constitute the back-bone of the whole defence against the frontal and flank attacks.

In connection with the above-mentioned chief attack, the Commander-in-Chief aimed a blow at the enemy's wing, where he assumed, that just in consequence of the concentration of the Bolsheviks before Warsaw itself, he would meet with a relatively weak resistance. Tactically the battle was to develop under the very walls of Warsaw and by the beginning of a strong Polish offensive in the region of Modlin and in a northern direction.

Immediately after that chief attack was to be de-

livered at the projecting flank of the enemy and was to be led by the Commander-in-Chief.

The successful carrying out of this plan was exceedingly difficult for the reason that, in the midst of a continuous retreat it required a complete re-grouping of the troops. Pilsudski decided to withdraw the weary troops further towards the west and to entrust to them the defence of Warsaw itself, but he advanced the stronger groups, which were capable of making a concentrated attack, from the north towards the south, in the direction of Demblin.

This brought it about that the army, in course of retreat, had to move cross-wise, which, in consequence of the overloading of the railway lines, and of the encumbering of every road by fugitives, was extremely difficult.

But this difficulty was as nothing compared with the risk which threatened Pilsudski on the south.

By attacking from the line of Demblin directly towards the north, he uncovered almost his whole front and exposed his rear to an attack which Budienny had been hastily preparing for weeks for the Polish front. For Budienny, occupied and bound in a struggle by General Zielinski's army in the neighbourhood of Lwów, was making every effort to spring at Lublin and Zamość. If he did so in time, he would have been able to fall upon the rear of Pilsudski's army and destroy it completely. For then that army would have its wings broken by Budienny and by the Bolshevik army fighting under Warsaw.

But the Commander-in-Chief considered it worth while to run this risk in view of the advantages which

the successful carrying out of his plan might bring. The events of those August days were soon to show who was right, on which side was the fortune of war and whether the Commander-in-Chief had in vain exposed Warsaw to the enemy's blow.

The fortune of war...

The Polish towns and villages, and, it appeared, everyone, now doubted as to that fortune.

Already the archives of the city had been borne away, already the government offices had been evacuated, already the families of the officials had been sent away into the interior of the country, already immense trains full of fugitives had moved out to Little Poland... Masses of wounded lay in every railway station of Warsaw, columns of infantry and artillery moved along every street day and night, none knowing whither they went or whence they came, or why they were moving. They went from the north to the south, from the east to the west...

“Where are you going? Why are you going away?” asked the population of the soldiers taking part in that enigmatical dislocation of troops...

The soldiers only shrugged their shoulders, leaving everyone in still greater doubt.

“When will you make a stand? Why are you retreating?”

They retreated in those last days which were wonderful and full of sunlight, of beautiful weather that seemed to have something tragic in it, — they retreated until they were under the very walls of Warsaw, under its very last forts.

On every side of the town sounded the thunder

of artillery, and already upon the white ribbon of the Vistula there moved a great red ring of fire and a glow of conflagrations... Now success wavered, now, at Radzymin, where the brave General Joseph Haller was mustering his battalions in the first line of trenches, the enemy seemed about to conquer... Here at the threatened point appeared Witos and Daszynski, appeared the Government, speaking the most hearty words of comfort to the soldiers...

Now on the north, only just touching the flank of the heroic General Sikorski's army, an army patched with volunteers made up of fresh, untried brigades and divisions, the Bolshevik forces poured down far to the west, sowing destruction everywhere. Now the red troops had almost taken the fort near Plock and the fort near Wloclawek...

Already Gaja Khan's great cavalry corps had an open road either straight to the west, through Pomerania to the Germans or, after the passage of the Vistula, to the rear of Warsaw.

Already simultaneously from the south the Polish defensive positions near the Vistula had been broken through and their garrison pressed inwards, already Otwock had fallen, already the enemy stood near the fort at Maciejowice and at any moment might cross over on to the left bank...

Already, finally, that enemy was preparing himself for the concluding storm of Radzymin and there was one night during this fighting when the enemy was approaching the first, most outlying houses of Praga.

Individual leaders such as the celebrated Joseph Haller, the young, attractive and heroic General Sikor-

ski, the courageous General Roy and the experienced General Zieliński held out splendidly, disputing every inch of ground...

But where was the man who had staked the capital, who bore the responsibility for this whole conflict which would be decisive for the fate of his country? Where was he who with such pride said in the State Defence Council that he had not lost faith in the soldiers, whilst everyone else had lost that faith?...

Where was the Commander-in-Chief in those moments which seemed to be the last?

It may be said that, in the words of the order, he stood everywhere at the crossing of the ways... His firm will fixed the limit everywhere of the blood to be shed by the weary defenders of all the threatened positions but his heart, the heart of a great warrior, made ready elastically for a new advance.

In that very time of death and despair he collected divisions patiently and prepared them to deal the blow, ever delaying until the whole weight of the enemy was finally directed on to the line of the Vistula, and until the Bolshevik masses had penetrated far into the west...

Then, watching this moment, Piłsudski ordered General Sikorski to make his demonstration of an offensive. This general's army turned firmly towards the north, fighting near the river Wkra, even crossing it, forcing its way. The enemy thought that the Poles would try to throw off in this direction the weight of the forces attacking the capital.

Hence the Bolsheviks gathered still more strongly and numerously...

And then suddenly, as if a gate had been thrown open from the Bug to the Vistula, a line of troops, bristling with bayonets, quivered suddenly along the way from Demblin to beyond Kock... On August 16th, 1920 the terrible blow was delivered, by the Commander-in-Chief himself, on the flank of the whole Bolshevik army, which now lay close to Warsaw. The weak left wing of that army that is, the Mozyrz group, was broken up, torn into pieces, and a great mass of Polish infantry poured forward in 60 to 70 kilometre marches from the south to the north, cutting off the Bolsheviks fighting line from its rear, from its ammunition, commissariat, materials and base.

The Bolshevik divisions, standing between Warsaw and Maciejowice lost their touch, their connection, their breath... They were drawn into the whirlpool of Pilsudski's battalions, pressed upon also from the west by the defenders of the Vistula. In the course of 24 hours they were mixed up into one great, inextricable tangle, which the infantry very soon bore into strips.

The same lot met the Bolshevik army which was attacking Warsaw... This army, upon the left wing of which an extensive attack was made, which was deprived of all touch with the southern sectors, which did not know, for the moment, what had happened,... in just the same way, overwhelmed with the whirlwind of that attack, began to twist hopelessly round on its axis. Brigades and whole divisions began to scatter about through the woods, throwing away their arms. The enemy commanders lost all contact with each other and finally gave contradictory orders. White fear fell upon the commissioners and all the Bolsheviks.

vist government authorities who had already begun to fulfil their functions on the right bank of the Vistula, who had begun to arrange things after their own fashion, stripping the population of everything it possessed, driving it, as far as possible further to the east...

The reaction of the Polish population burst forth with elemental force. The peasants, at the very news of the approach of the Polish troops, seized their flails, forks and hatchets and disarmed the enemy's troops. More than once they attacked batteries, transports of ammunition and camps, handing over everything afterwards to the Polish troops.

The same thing happened in the little towns, where the Polish population, absolutely without difference of religion, came forward openly and in arms against the invader.

The whole country from Demblin on the east to Brest Litewsk and up to Dzialdowa on the north presented a strange sight during those August days.

On the great high roads everywhere Polish groups, marching northwards crossed with crowds of soldiers from the broken Bolshevik army: fleeing towards the east. Among the great bodies of soldiers there penetrated in all directions the population which kept dragging rut of the by-paths, out of the woods and out of the settlements, hundreds and thousands of Bolshevik fugitives. Simultaneously from the east towards the west came an immense wave of the population whom the Bolsheviks had dragged away with them, whom they wished to drive to somewhere beyond the Bug, but which had managed to escape them in those moments of confusion and panic.

Now the chief command of the Bolshevik army understood the whole extent of its defeat. It urged on Budenny with countless radio-telegrams to break through as quickly as he could and attack Zamość... He was to hasten with all his forces to attack Pilsudski in the rear...

Actually Budenny, who also understood the situation extremely well, seeing that Pilsudski's infantry was doing marches of 80 kilometres a day, knowing that that infantry, like a terrible rat, was biting its way into the internal parts of the Bolshevik army, began to struggle towards Zamość, made a circuit, rushed forward, made a flanking movement, lost half of his men in vain...

That old Mazurian, General Zielinski together with General Stanislas Haller, held him there, not allowing him to move forward.

Meanwhile the terrible grating with which Pilsudski had barred in the Bolshevik troops from Demblin to Brest, began to extend out towards the north, from the direction of Modlin, and finally from the direction of Thorn towards the west.

If we wished to give a tangible image of what then took place over those immense expanses of territory, we should have to say that it was as if Pilsudski, as a farmer harrows a fallow field with a sharp harrow, drove through and through the hostile army...

The strong nails and hooks of this harrow were the Polish battalions, drawn by the impulse of their Commander-in-Chief from the south to the north. There were neither roads nor lanes nor paths which the teeth

of this harrow did not pass over... And the whole enemy army was crushed, the remainder, finding itself as it were in a deep bag from Modlin to beyond Plock and Wloclawek, was either broken up, or, to the number of about twenty or thirty thousand men, fled into Germany.

Thus actually in these days of the famous victory the Polish Commander-in-Chief stood at the crossing of all the roads of his country... His energy, his heart, his spirit at every crossways, urged the Polish troops forward, seemed to attach to their wearied arms wings of glory and victory.

The Polish troops after a few days of pursuit were at the Bug.

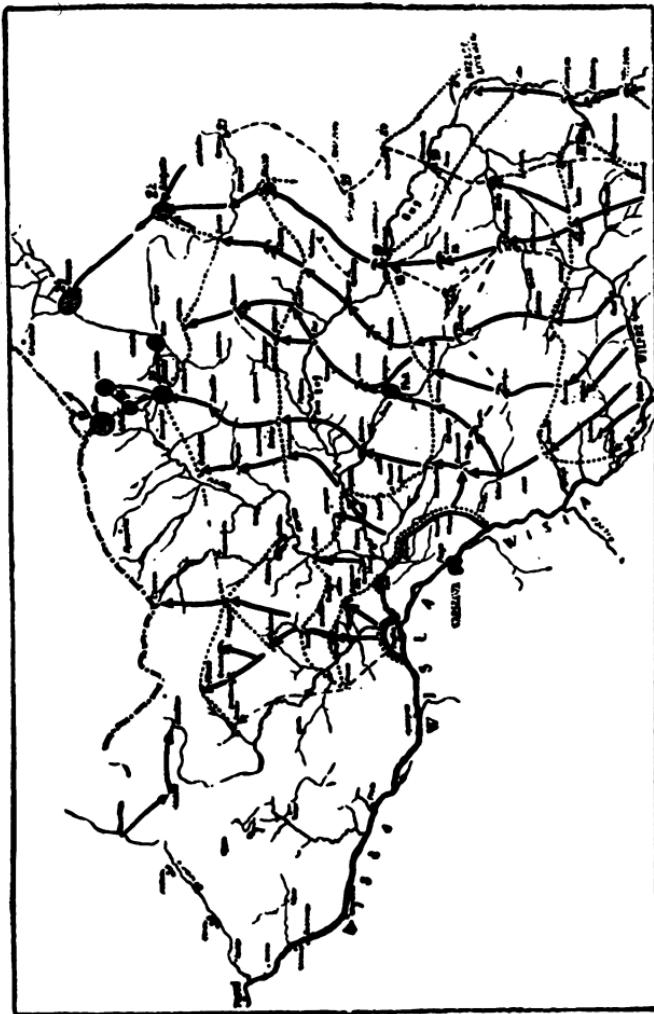
The Commander-in-Chief immediately marshalled them for further fighting, which went on along the Niemen. The great battle on the Niemen, which consisted also of an immense manoeuvre on Lida, completed the victory, finally destroying the great reserves which the enemy had brought up on that line, so as once more to take the offensive.

That Bolshevik counter-offensive was already impossible. The Bolsheviks had lost in men more than half of their ranks and their losses in war material and in technical material were so great that they rendered their army unfit for further fighting.

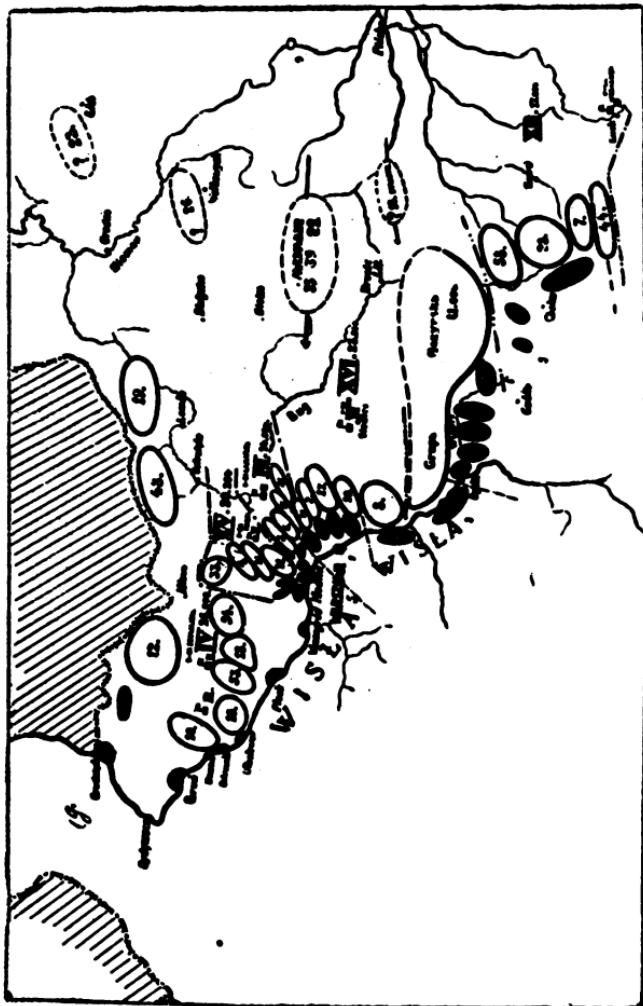
The great fight on the Vistula covered the Polish army with immortal glory. That army had won a victory over a far more numerous enemy in the most difficult material and moral circumstances. That battle placed Joseph Pilsudski in the ranks of the greatest

military leaders of Poland. It lit up the young life of the Polish State with a most marvellous brilliance, it saved Europe from that most terrible danger, which would have threatened it had the Poles lost — the danger of a junction of the Bolsheviks with the Germans — of madness with crime.

MAPS



1. THE DOTTED LINES INDICATE THE LINE OF THE FRONT ON AUGUST 16th, 18th, 20th AND 22nd.
2. THE FIGURES ON THE RIGHT DENOTE THE DAYS IN AUGUST.
Warszawa = Warsaw. Wisla = Vistula.



THE POSITIONS OF THE BOLCHEVIST TROOPS UP TO AUGUST 16th 1920.

Warsawa = Warsaw. Wisla = Vistula.

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